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ABSTRACT

The role of language instruction in a changing society is scrutinized in this article. Enrollment trends in several subject areas are compared and reasons for the decline in English, mathematics, science, and languages are related to current student attitudes. Instructional objectives of language programs are criticized particularly for their narrowness in scope, and suggestions for the development of innovative course offerings are proposed. (RI)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE AGE OF AQUARIUS*

by
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As foreign language teachers we're peddling an expensive commodity that seems to be meeting a great deal of sales resistance and we're faced with an enormous amount of competition. It's literally expensive for a school to operate a foreign language program, and it's costly in time and effort for the students to learn. If we were car salesmen dealing with similar problems, we'd try to remedy the situation by putting out an economy model, a sports model, a luxury model, or even a heavy-duty model, since we all know that not every prospective buyer wants a four-door sedan. We know, too, that some of our clients buy cars as prestige items, so if they want a cheap, flashy car, that's what we give them. During the next few years, like the car salesman, we will be forced to pay stricter attention to customer demands in order to survive professionally. The time has come for us to correct our myopic approach to foreign language teaching. In the past we asked "how?"; the "now" questions should perhaps include "what?" and "whom?".

Various indications lead us to believe that our clientele is dwindling and switching to our competitors. Foreign language enrollments have dropped significantly in important public school systems. Andrew Malcolm reports in an article published in The New York Times on August 23, 1970, that a few years ago Denver's 96,000 student public school system had 15,000 youngsters studying various foreign languages (compared to 5,000 before Sputnik). Last year there were 10,250 students in Denver enrolled in foreign language classes.[1] Miami, Florida's Dade County school system, which has 250,000 students, has suffered similar declines. Mrs. Elizabeth Alonso, the only foreign language consultant left in the system, comments in the same article, "I'm amazed that foreign language education has survived at all."[2] A look at our local picture shows that in 1961, approximately 128,000 students from all over Texas were enrolled in Level I foreign language courses, but only 60,776 were in Level II courses; equally distressing is the situation in Level III, where there were only about 19,000 enrolled.[3]

And all is not well at the college level. A number of prestigious universities, including Yale, Brown and Stanford, have abolished the undergraduate foreign language requirement. Duke and UCLA have reduced the number of language courses required, and many other schools have been considering such action. St. Edward's University in Austin has likewise dropped the required courses from its curriculum. Texas foreign language teachers should look at St. Edward's most recent catalogue because this school's educational philosophy seems to be typical of the current national trend. The St. Edward's program consists of four areas: English proficiency, which can be demonstrated by examination or course work; a major area of concentration; interdisciplinary courses (students must pass four from a large number of choices); and free electives. This means that some students will take foreign languages, but there is no foreign language requirement per se. At the present time most colleges and universities in Texas have some kind of foreign language requirement for the B.A. degree, but only about 17% require foreign language for entrance. Glen Willbern, in his article entitled "Foreign Language Entrance and Degree Requirements in Colleges That Grant the B.A. Degree: Fall, 1966" that appeared in the October, 1967, issue of Foreign Language Annals, points out that in 1966, 93% of Texas colleges required foreign language for the B.A. degree.[4] This represents only a very slight drop from the 98% which was recorded for 1960.[5] However, I suspect that this may possibly be the first ripple of la nouvelle vague.

Pressure to eliminate foreign language requirements comes from administrators and faculty and also from parents and students. Some of the students who need foreign language study

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the most scream the loudest. They often remind me of Sally Brown who, while protesting against going to kindergarten, finally resigns herself to her fate but only on the condition that she won't have to study Latin.[6] She is indeed typical of some of our students who feel forced by their parents to go to college because there's nothing else they can do. Let me tell you some of the arguments I've heard from UT students trying to get out of the foreign language requirement. Not long ago a government major came to see me and loudly proclaimed, "Foreign languages are ancient. Why do I need them? Everybody speaks English." I calmly asked him why in the world we're operating a bilingual school just outside Austin if everyone speaks English. Another student, likewise a government major, claimed to have absolutely no use for a foreign language because he wasn't going to graduate school. He's just planning to be in Vista. And I've heard the mental block argument almost as often as draft boards hear pleas from people who claim to be conscientious objectors.

Please don't think that just because I'm a foreign language teacher, I insist that everyone pass a foreign language. There are some people who really can't learn one. Some of these students are more than competent in other areas of their collegework.

Let me cite a couple of examples. About six months ago, I came across the case of a young man who is married to a French woman and who had been stationed in France when he was in the Army. His wife told me that if she tutored him every evening for two hours he would pass the quiz given the next day with a C or possibly even a B. However, two days later, all was forgotten. He didn't have much luck with Spanish either. By some coincidence I was able to locate the man who had taught him first semester Spanish on three separate occasions. He was eventually able to pass the course with a C but couldn't reach first base in the next course. This young man has spent the past twelve years trying to get a degree. He's now a senior with a very respectable grade-point average. In fact, in his major, which is English, he has received nothing but A's and B's. The last time I spoke to him about his foreign language problem, he was very upset. As he put it, "It's bad enough I can't learn French when my wife's a native and she's been tutoring me, but when my five-year-old daughter, who has been learning Spanish in nursery school, speaks it better than I do, that's too much!"

There was also a young man who tried desparately to learn Russian. He was a government major and thought he could use it upon graduation. He was sent to see me by the chairman of the department of Slavic Languages, who had told him he was giving him a D for effort in this third semester course but on the condition that he'd never again enroll in a Russian class. This poor young man has had a very severe hearing problem all his life, so we decided to absolve him from the requirement.

One thing I've noticed is that, in general, students with real learning problems make determined efforts to pass the foreign language sequence. The frivolous arguments often come from people who could pass a foreign language if they would only try. I think it's a shame that we're in danger of losing this requirement to the following kinds of arguments:

1. It takes too much time--four semesters of French; I might as well major in it.
2. I'll never use the stuff. If I travel, I'll always be able to find someone who speaks English.
3. It'll ruin my grade-point average. I've got to go to law school; or I'm pre-med. I can't have a C on my record.
4. I already have 14 hours of classwork this semester. How can I possibly study Spanish, French or German? How will I fit it in? Besides, I can't spend all that time in lab.
5. And finally, we've all heard, "It's not relevant."

One serious argument is heard from professors as well as students. There seems to be a tendency to increase the number of hours a student must complete in his major and minor

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fields. At times college faculty lose sight of the fact that not everyone they teach is a budding Ph.D. A 17-hour foreign language sequence is a considerable fraction of the total undergraduate program, and many teachers would like to reduce or eliminate foreign language requirements in order to increase the number of courses in the major and related fields. In other words, we may be suffering from demands for early specialization.

Those who do enjoy the foreign language sequence and who might consider majoring in a language are often discouraged from doing so because they feel convinced that they'll never get a job upon graduation. They say, "What can I do with a French major? Early this semester I asked my students why they were or were not majoring in French. Here is one of the replies, which was typical of several: "Utter stupidity, I suppose. I took four years of French in high school and was all hopped up on the language, culture, etc.... At this point, close to graduation, I see no point in the language as a major--it will prepare me for absolutely no career, as I've decided I'm entirely too nervous and impatient to teach. After graduation I will still have to decide on some sort of career and prepare for it." What students don't seem to realize is that if you choose a major with the "What is the one thing I can do with it?" or the "What is the one thing it will make me?" criterion, there's precious little one can do with a B.A. degree except teach or go on to graduate school. Telling our youngsters, "Now you study hard so you can become an interpreter for the U.N." is deceitful. And just handing them a copy of Gilbert Kettlekamp's article (MLJ, March 1967) "Vocational Opportunities for Foreign Language Students" does not solve the problem because many of our students see little relationship between what they learn in the classroom and the job possibilities listed in the article. One thing that students don't realize until they have graduated and teachers don't seem to emphasize is that the knowledge of a foreign language alone will not land them jobs. It's not enough to speak Spanish, French or German. "What else can you do?" is the key question. In the future our prospective majors must develop other talents as well as their linguistic skills. What they will do upon graduation will depend on the other skills they have developed. A bilingual secretary should be a cracker jack typist, and if you plan to be a good translator you will need to write well and learn something about the field in which you plan to do your translating. If you want to catalogue Russian books for a university library, you'll have to know more than a lot of details about Dostoevsky's life and the style of his writings. Now, we're obviously not supposed to offer courses in typing and cataloguing in our foreign language departments, but we owe it to our students to improve the quality of our academic advising and to see to it that their programs are meaningful.

If students are turning away from foreign languages, just what are they taking? What do they consider relevant? We can get some indication of this from what people major in. I've studied UT's Arts and Sciences graduating classes from 1965 - May 1970 and was able to follow interesting trends in several fields. In the past five years a total of 10,364 B.A. degrees were awarded, and 847 went to foreign language majors. Our language degrees were distributed in the following manner:

43.9% -- Spanish
28.1% -- French
13.7% -- German
5.6% -- Russian

and all others (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Portuguese, Italian and Czech) -- 8.7%. These percentages have stayed roughly constant from year to year. In 1965, 6.6% of all B.A. degrees granted went to foreign language majors. In 1968, the percentage was 8.7%. In 1970, the percentage was 7.9%. It's still too soon to know exactly what these statistics mean. All we can conclude is that during the past five years these percentages have been fluctuating in an almost random manner between 6.6% and 8.7%.

Let's compare these statistics with those in some other fields:

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1. Perhaps the Department of Psychology shows the most dramatic growth. In 1965, 4.8% of all B.A. degrees went to psychology majors, whereas this year, 11.4% of all B.A. candidates were psychology majors.

2. Another dramatic rise may be found in the government department. In 1965, 6.4% of B.A. graduates were government majors, with 11.6% recorded for this year.

3. Mathematics rose spectacularly following Sputnik but is now sliding a bit. In 1965, 16.2% of B.A. degrees went to mathematics majors, whereas there were only 14.1% this year.

4. English has undergone an even larger drop. Five years ago, English claimed 15.0% of all B.A. candidates. This year the percentage was down to 10.4%.

5. Finally, in 1965, 2.7% of all degrees granted in Arts and Sciences went to those getting a B.S. in chemistry. This year the percentage dropped to 1.8%.

Why should percentages drop in mathematics, chemistry and English, whereas there has been a spectacular rise in psychology, government and sociology (2.8% to 4.3%)? One reason for the decline in English is that many students don't consider literary criticism relevant. This is also one of the problems facing the foreign languages. In many departments literary criticism is the subject that is favored, and many of our clients consider this pedantic and meaningless. Another possible explanation for the decreasing popularity of English as a major is the fear that the job market for teachers is becoming flooded.

In the sciences the absolute number of majors has been staying about the same but because the university enrollment has been increasing about 9% each year, the percentages of science majors have been falling. There seems to be a current disenchantment with technology among our young people. Also, few people are interested in the stern discipline required of budding chemists and physicists. I predict that with the present interest in ecology we'll see increased enrollments in biology. However, how many students will persevere and graduate remains to be seen.

One feeling expressed by many of our young people is that we've got to change people in order to improve the world. (Apparently this hasn't made them more willing to study foreign languages in order to communicate with their fellow beings.) Perhaps this is why they are flocking to the psychology department. People appear to be more interested than ever before in understanding themselves. More and more the young person demands information that will have meaning in his own life. The extreme form of this is the fad for astrology and oriental mysticism.

Faced with the picture I've just painted, we might react in various ways:

1. We could panic. Some high school teachers fear that if there were no foreign language requirement at the college level, high school students would take the "why bother?" attitude, and I must agree that this could indeed happen in a number of cases.

2. Some teachers might tend to take more of a "to heck with it" approach. They feel they'll teach the happy few and take delight at the prospect of losing those who aren't interested in learning. These teachers prefer to concentrate on those who care and claim that these students will learn a lot more than they currently do.

These attitudes, although understandable, are deplorable, particularly in a world that sadly suffers from the inability to communicate. They suggest a defeatist approach. We must not

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accept the idea that foreign languages are obsolete in any liberal arts curriculum. This idea is untenable and indefensible, for at no other time in our country's history have we needed foreign language ability more.

A solution to our problems will not be easy to find. People just don't change overnight. In order even to approach the answers we seek, we must ask the right questions and face some bitter realities. Let's see if we can profit from introspection and an understanding of others.

First of all, just who are our clients? Primarily they are high school and/or college students, most of whom will never be majors. Why are they studying a foreign language? In many cases, our high school youngsters study a language to get into college, whether or not they want to or should, and in an attempt to be helpful many teachers have geared their courses toward the College Board exams. At times they lose sight of the fact that they're supposed to teach French, Spanish, German or Latin, and they teach to pass a test. Often too much material is presented and little is absorbed. We present, but do the students learn?

In the January, 1970, issue of the Bulletin of the NASSP, Lorraine Strasheim, director of the Indiana Language Program, points out that:

> "In Indiana, 65% of all beginning foreign-language students enter second year; 29% of all second-year students continue into third year; only about 31% of those in third year will enroll in the fourth. Thus, if there were 100 students in first year, there will be 65 in the second year; of these 65 about 19 enter the third year and 6 the fourth. Eight of that original 100 continue foreign language study in college or university. It is for these eight students that the whole thrust of foreign language education has been geared in any single school."[7]

On the college level, most of our clients are in our classes because this is something they must do in order to get a B.A. degree. If they could get out of it, many would. Part of the problem here is the fact that the B.A. degree is no longer what it used to be, and for that matter, neither is the concept of a college education. Think for a moment about who attends college. It's getting to the point where a college diploma today is like a high school diploma was about twenty years ago--a kind of union card--a necessity for anything but the most menial jobs. John Keats, in The Sheepskin Psychosis, points out there are many reasons why we send our kids to college besides our simple desire to get them out of the house, but this is one of the important reasons.[8] Since half of our high school graduates now go on to college, a college education is no longer the privilege it once was. Keats feels that "going to college has merely become the general activity of the intelligent young, to whom we offer nothing else."[9] David Riesman and Christopher Jencks, contributing a paper to Nevitt Sanford's book, The American College describe this situation in the following manner: "The American college exists as a vast WPA project which gives promising adolescents work to do while keeping them out of the job market and also keeping several hundred thousand faculty members off the streets."[10] The pressure for college entrance has become so severe that it begins at the nursery school level. Parents believe that if a child doesn't go to a good nursery school he can't get into a good grade school, then not into a good high school, that will prepare him for the "right" college. Another eye opening book on this subject is Hillel Black's They Shall Not Pass. Mr. Black says that the most difficult school to get into isn't Harvard but Hunter Elementary School, where one of the minimum requirements is an IQ of 150.[11]

As a result of the feeling that "anyone who is anyone goes to college," a large number of students who couldn't care less are filling our colleges and universities. As one key administrator puts it, "They want their credentials without working for them." For these

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students our campuses have become dumping grounds. I feel that academic apathy or downright disinterest is a problem that is not limited to higher education. The trouble with some of our clients at all levels is that they have never really wanted anything badly enough to work for it. We need to create a foreign language program that will interest this kind of student as well as the youngster who is anxious to learn.

Keeping our varied clientele in mind, we might want to structure our foreign language curriculum accordingly. Step I might be to evaluate our goals. Must all of our students learn to understand, speak, read and write a foreign language? For some of our clients the purpose of a foreign language course might well be to teach listening and speaking; for some it might be to emphasize reading--literature and/or modern writing and research. I know of one class that uses the weekly magazine L'Express as the textbook. Each week the instructor selects articles that he considers most valuable for his group. These students are learning a great deal about contemporary French culture and at the same time are improving their reading skills. What I'm suggesting is that perhaps not every student should be studying the same things. One way to revitalize our programs would be to teach more culture. To quote one of my current students, "The French language is not just the grammar and their literature; it's their history, art, and culture. You can't be French or think French if you don't know that." Part of our problem is that we see so much before us to teach that we unconsciously want our students to learn everything we know and we're frustrated because they don't.

We're going to have to make some choices. Don't worry, if properly done, we won't be lowering our standards. I feel that it's very important for the "now" student to be able to use a foreign language; but with the foreign language sequence as it currently is, our students don't learn what we think they should and what they're told they will. That's the cause of a lot of their frustration. They say "Two whole years of studying Spanish and all those hours in lab, and I still can't speak and write it!" We have no right making them think they will in that relatively short period of time. It's pure folly, and particularly when they don't begin a language until they're sixteen. Ideally, foreign languages should be offered in the grade schools just as math and social studies are. Then, if they continued foreign language study in high school, they'd know quite a bit when they entered college, if that is what they decided to do. I feel that one of our basic errors is that we have considered foreign language learning primarily for college bound youngsters. It's true that college graduates are those who will teach a foreign language, but even the man on the street could benefit from a basic knowledge of Spanish, French, or German. And here in Texas, everyone should have a basic knowledge of Spanish. To quote Lorraine Strasheim, whose article I cited earlier: "It is incredible that the study of a language--a people's most characteristic differentation--could ever have become so much an intellectual pursuit."[12]

There are lots of things one can offer to students of foreign languages. In order to survive professionally, we're going to have to have more appeal. We must make our courses interesting. In fact, if we could give our high school students an interest in language learning, we'd be doing more for them than we could imagine. By interesting I mean appealing and meaningful. To do this we need not necessarily lower standards. This need not mean a Mickey Mouse course. A civilization course can be meaningful, even if taught in English. You can have standards, fun, and meaning at the same time.

We don't have ideal students or ideal facilities or ideal teachers. Instead of complaining endlessly about it, we ought to deal with these problems as realistically as possible. The question each of us must ask about each of his students is "How can I teach him what I can teach him in the time I've got?" I've seen some very exciting projects going on in high schools from French and Mexican dinners to the French Club Symposium on the State level. One of my student teachers once took her class to a kitchen in the home economics department and had the students prepare an "omelette aux fines herbes" according to the recipe in their textbooks. In addition to and in some cases instead of preparing our youngsters to read Camus, Lope de Vega, or Goethe, we might teach them how to read with appreciation a Spanish,

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French, or German newspaper or magazine. It might be nice to see how other countries report the news. How do other cultures view us? If many of our students become bilingual secretaries, somewhere along the way we might offer them some commercial Spanish. If we have budding scientists in our classes, perhaps we should give them appropriate readings and teach them how to use necessary research tools in the foreign language. But even more important than preparing students vocationally, we should show them how to use the foreign language concerned in their own personal lives. Did you ever say to yourself, "One of these days, I'd love to do such and such with one of my classes?" Well, your chance has come. We must teach what we think is right. What is right will depend on the school system and perhaps even the school within the system as well as world conditions. There are some things we will want to teach all of our students; some things will be taught to just a handful of them. But the "what?" and the "to whom?" are urgent questions and they must be answered by us. Our answers may change frequently. We'll never be smart enough to know all the right answers, but we must continue to ask the right questions.

FOOTNOTES

1. Andrew H. Malcolm, "Study of Foreign Languages Declines," The New York Times, August 23, 1970, p. 59, col. 1.

2. Ibid.

3. These statistics were provided by the Division of Program Development of the Texas Education Agency.

4. Glen Willbern, "Foreign Language Entrance and Degree Requirements in Colleges that Grant the B.A. Degree: Fall, 1966," Foreign Language Annals, I (October, 1967), p. 52.

5. Ibid.

6. Charles M. Schulz, You Can Do It, Charlie Brown (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963).

7. Lorraine A. Strasheim, "Foreign Language: Part of a New Apprenticeship for Living," NASSP Bulletin (January, 1970), 90.

8. John Keats, The Sheepskin Psychosis (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967), 29-30.

9. Keats, p. 30.

10. David Riesman and Christopher Jencks, "The Viability of the American College," in The American College, ed. Nevitt Sanford (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1962), 76.

11. Hillel Black, They Shall Not Pass (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 3-4.

12. Strasheim, p. 99.